open wide our hearts
the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

High School: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Grade: High School-- Course 2, Course 4, Course 5, Course 6, and Option C.

Doctrinal concepts:

- Course 2: God creates the human person in his image and likeness; we must respect the dignity of all (CCC 1700-1709);
- Course 4: The unity of the human race (CCC 760, 791, 813-822);
- Course 6: The natural moral law as the basis for human rights and duties (CCC 1956-1960);
- Option C: Christ's command to love one another as he has loved us (CCC 1823, 2196)

"This is the original meaning of justice, where we are in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of God's creation. Justice was a gift of grace given to all of humanity."
– *U.S. bishops,* Open Wide Our Hearts

Objectives

Students should be able to:

1. Become familiar with Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on the life and dignity of the human person.
2. Reflect on how racism rejects the image of God present in each of us.
3. Understand how the life and witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies the social engagement called for by CST.

Quotes from *Open Wide our Hearts*

- "Overcoming racism is a demand of justice, but because Christian love transcends justice, the end of racism will mean that our community will bear fruit beyond simply the fair treatment of all."

- "Racism is a moral problem that requires a moral remedy—a transformation of the human heart—that impels us to act. The power of this type of transformation will be a strong catalyst in eliminating those injustices that impinge on human dignity."

- “We call on everyone, especially all Christians and those of other faith traditions, to help repair the breach caused by racism, which damages the human family. Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation has been pivotal at key moments in our history, for instance, in the abolition of slavery and during the civil rights era. The leadership of the civil rights movement, especially that of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., invited ecumenical and interreligious cooperation, as was seen when Catholics, Protestants, and Jews marched together. That spirit is integral to the fight today and, in some communities, the success of this effort will very much depend on this kind of collaboration. As religious leaders, we must continue this tradition.”

- “Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously. It requires us to reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist.”

Background Information for Educator

- USCCB Backgrounders on racism and housing, education, employment, voting, criminal justice, and economic inequality.
- A Prayer Service for Racial Healing in Our Land
- *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love.* A Pastoral Letter Against Racism
- *Discrimination and Christian Conscience: A Statement Issued by the Catholic Bishops of the United States*
- *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States*

Instructions for the Lesson

Teacher will lead students to read or summarize: CCC 760, CCC 1700, CCC 1956-1960, and CCC 2196.

- Ask small groups to each read one of these scripture passages or choose one for the whole group to read: Luke 6:31, John 13:34, and Galatians 3:28.
    - What do you notice about these readings?
    - What is important about each of these readings?

- After all small groups have all reported about their reading, ask: What do they have in common?

Now, watch together this video on the Life and Dignity of the Human Person.

- Or, alternatively, talk about the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. A short summary can be found here.
- Distribute copies of the seven themes of CST.

Ask the students to divide into groups and assign each group one principle of CST. Ask each group to come up with one example of how their principle of CST is honored and one way it is violated.

- Talk about how the work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplifies the social engagement called for by Catholic Social Teaching. Ask the group to read the following background:

Background on the Life and Legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement

Since the time of the founding fathers, our country has been blessed with citizens who have had the courage to rise to the challenges of their day and call their fellow citizens forward in the unending task of building an ever more just nation. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one such figure who directed his work toward both the structural and personal causes of racism and whose witness continues to inspire work to transform our communities today.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929. He was the son and grandson of pastors at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. In King's youth, he attended racially segregated public schools in Georgia. A bright young man, King graduated from high school early, at only fifteen years old, and he went on to study at Morehouse College in Atlanta, receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1948. He then studied further at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and Boston University, earning his doctoral degree from the latter in 1955. While studying in Boston, King courted and married Coretta Scott. They went on to have two sons and two daughters. King served as the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and labored as an advocate for civil rights for black Americans.

As one example of his witness on civil rights, in December of 1955, King helped to organize and lead the blacks of Montgomery, Alabama, to boycott the city's buses, which were segregated. This became known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and it lasted for just over a year, into December of 1956. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was jailed, his home was bombed, and he underwent significant mistreatment. However, he never relented and, in December of 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that it was unconstitutional to segregate buses.

> *The Gospel was at the core of King's rhetoric, as can be seen in his many sermons, writings (such as his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in which he notably quoted prominent Catholic saints Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas), and speeches (such as his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in August of 1963). Until his assassination on April 4, 1968, King spoke out against numerous injustices in society, particularly those stemming from racial disharmony. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., stands as a figure whose legacy includes fostering racial harmony, and who witnessed to how the Good News of Jesus Christ underscores our inalienable human dignity, which God has bestowed on every one of us.*

- Ask the group to list and describe how government-sanctioned racial segregation was an affront to the God-given human dignity of those who experienced discrimination.

- Discuss how those who experienced segregation still possess human dignity even though the government (e.g. the Supreme Court) did not recognize their basic human rights. How is God the origin of this human dignity, and thus of our basic human rights?

Look again at the following scriptural passages: Luke 6:31, John 13:34, and Galatians 3:28.

- Why do you think Dr. King drew heavily from Scripture in founding the Civil Rights Movement?

- Why is it important to note that not only black Americans, but also many white Americans, were active in the Civil Rights Movement as they worked together to foster healing and reconciliation within society?

- What is important about building communities that work together? How and why does this reflect Jesus' teachings on love for neighbor?

Select one of the USCCB backgrounders racism and employment, housing, wealth, education, criminal justice, voting, and the Native American experience. Share concrete examples of systemic racism that continues to impact many communities of color today. Ask:

- How does systemic racism, which has historic roots as well as modern-day manifestations, continue to erode the human dignity of many persons of color today?
- Despite Rev. Dr. King's legacy, what work is left to be done, and what is the role of faith communities in this work?

Summary and Final Activity

- Read this article from the Archdiocese of Washington's Catholic Standard newspaper titled "A Prayer, and a Life, for Justice" (August 14, 2013 [written in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963)].

- How did Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle (who delivered the prayer of invocation at the March on Washington) of the Archdiocese of Washington embrace a Christian worldview that was evidenced in his support of harmony between people of different ethnicities?

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